

Religion in Schools

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Part 1: Introduction, Case Study, and Ethical Question

“The issue of separation of church and state has great moral, legal, and political importance, and the subject currently holds special interest. An unprecedented number of people are injecting religion into politics; pressures are mounting both to have religious observances in public schools and to support sectarian education through tax revenues; and the United States Supreme Court may soon be reinterpreting constitutional constraints on the relation between religion and public life.” (Audi, 1989).

As political tensions rise on the heels of religious uproar across the United States, the southern states in particular, the separation of church and state is being blurred. With Texas being the first state to impose new regulations within elementary schools which would require teachers to use the Bible as a teaching tool. “Elementary school curriculum proposed this week would infuse new state reading and language arts lessons with teachings on the Bible, marking the latest push by Texas Republicans to put more Christianity in public schools.” (Downen and Salhotra, 2024). The new proposal by Texas GOP also states that those schools who use the Bible to teach elementary school students would receive more state funding than those who do not. This is quickly followed by Oklahoma Superintendent Ryan Walters, who has now released guidelines which would force Oklahoma schools to teach upper elementary (fifth grade) and beyond the bible, including the ten commandments as a “history tool”. “The announcement comes on the heels of much debate and concerns in the role of the Bible and its interpretation used in educational performance. Since 2019, it has been accepted by Oklahoma law that a Bible could be taught in its historical context. The Oklahoma Supreme Court recently ruled that local school

boards have the final say to determine which books and instructional materials are deemed to be appropriate in Oklahoma classrooms.” (Gables and Ward, 2024).

In July of 2024, Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters released his Instructional Guidelines for Teachers document, where he outlines the use of the Bible as a historical document which “has been a key cornerstone in the development of Western thought, influencing legal systems, ethical frameworks, and cultural norms.” (Walters, 2024). Many school boards and district Superintendents have remarked that the state laws are being bent and, having been a parent who called my own district’s superintendent, many districts are simply disregarding the edict.

So the question remains, **Is it ethical to teach the Bible in public schools?**

Part 2: Philosophy Reading Reflection

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded- namely, that pleasure, and freedom from

pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain”. (Mill, J.S, 1863)

Mill explains here that the morally correct thing to do is that which is better for the larger group, the greater good. The right actions promote happiness, by this he means that the right actions bring about good. Mill does not intend happiness to mean the emotion of being happy, but rather he intends happiness to mean the absence of suffering. In order to make the right moral decision one must choose the path that brings about the greatest happiness for the whole group, even if that means sacrificing one’s own happiness in the process. This quote applies to my case study because we are looking at how teaching young, impressionable students using a religious text might affect their lives, their schooling, individual thought processes and own sense of believes, let alone the beliefs and traditions their individual families might hold. In this way, we must weigh the benefits of bringing one religion into schools in communities who hold a variety of religious beliefs.

Part 3: Explanation of First Ethical Theory

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, a form of consequentialism, is most often associated with John Stuart Mill, mentioned above. Mill brought about the “Greatest Happiness Theory” which dictates that the correct moral action is that which brings about the greatest overall happiness. In this way, we are focusing on the outcome, the consequences, of the action and not the thought process, emotions or reasoning for the action itself. The greatest example of a Utilitarian issue would be the great

Trolley Problem brought forth by Philippa Foot in 2002. You know the one, there are 5 people on one lane and one person on the other, who do you sacrifice with the trolley? The greatest good theory would say that the one individual would be sacrificed to save the 5, therefore bringing suffering only to the one and saving the others from suffering. However, if the suffering of the one would outweigh the total amount of suffering for the many, then the correct action would be the one that spares the one suffering. Utilitarianism is about avoiding the most pain and suffering collectively. By only looking at the consequences of actions, Utilitarianism remains an impartial and objective moral theory.

Part 4: Application of First Ethical Theory

In the case of religion in public schools, where teaching one religion and using the Bible as a teaching tool, in a region where every family is likely to have different cultural and religious backgrounds, what is the right ethical choice? To teach or not to Teach, that is the question! So, what is the answer that brings about the greatest happiness and avoids the most pain? If we follow the dictations of Ryan Walters and use the Bible and Ten Commandments to teach impressionable children, are we then indoctrinating them? In my small town we have a surprising number of non-Christian religions. If we teach these small minds using the Bible, will it bring confusion and family strife? Children coming home from school with questions about Jesus and biblical stories to families who do not live by or believe in that doctrine. What about the teachers? Those forced to go against their own religions to teach Christian doctrines to children. Or those who believe it is morally unjustifiable to teach religion in school. Sure, the families who believe the same way that Ryan Walters does will be pleased, but what about all of those who do not? A Utilitarian would have to measure all of these possibilities, does the good outweigh the negative? Will more people find fault with public school teachers complying with

this than those who are happy about it? The Utility of teaching the Bible to our young people, versus letting them be brought up with the religious traditions of their own families, or even not brought up with religion at all and left to choose for themselves, all things that would need to be measured to come to the conclusion of the Greatest Happiness.

Part 5: Explanation and Application of Second Ethical Theory

Deontology

Immanuel Kant, one of the best-known Deontologist, once said “Good will is good because of how it wills, i.e. it is good in itself” (Kant, 2017). Deontology focuses very heavily on WHY a person acts the way they do. Deontology holds that a person is bound to duties, outside of one’s own interests and desires. These interests are unconditional and must be applied universally.

When making a decision you must be able to take your Maxim (the principle behind your decision, in this case teaching religion) and apply it universally across every individual, if there are no contradictions then the action is moral. So then let us do just that. In a world where it is ok to use the Bible as a teaching tool, one would then have to say it is ok to teach religion in schools. If we taught religion in schools, we would then have to teach every religion across the board to be fair, students would learn about Christianity, Pagan religions, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism etc. We would be setting every student up with a basic understanding of every religion in the world. Objectively, this would allow students to learn and draw their own conclusions, and decide what they believe in. This would be a fair and moral action. However, if we look at just teaching with the Bible, as our question asks, is it ethical to teach the Bible in public schools? In a world where we only teach the Bible to school children, then every child, no matter their family background, would have to learn the Bible. Children would then have contradictions thrown at them in religious beliefs at a young age that would ultimately lead to strife as parents

attempt to navigate a way to answer their questions without pushing beliefs on the children. This world would be full of contradictions, simply because there are hundreds of religions and teaching just one to small children is the biggest contraction of them all.

Part 6: Evaluation of First Ethical Theory Application

In applying Utilitarianism to the question, “is it ethical to teach the Bible in school?” we must look at the utility of doing so. As mentioned above, there are many factors here we must take into account. From the background of the children’s individual families to the backlash the school and teachers will face, to the moral complications the teachers might face in following the new regulations. I believe a Utilitarian would say that it is not ethical to teach the bible in school. While the Christian families who believe that everyone should follow their scripture would indeed be ok with this happening. Every other family, Christian or not, who believes that children should not be taught any religion in public school would untimely suffer to some extent. Children who need help with reading and math would instead be confused by Biblical stories they had never heard before. Teachers would deal with the backlash from angry parents, the school boards would be tied up with angry parents and teachers. While there would be some happiness here, the negative response would outweigh any happiness.

I also believe that a Deontologist would say that this issue is unethical. Simply because we are looking at teaching one belief system to impressionable youth. The contradictions in society that would cause are astronomical. In a world where hundreds of different belief systems exist, pushing one on the most impressionable population is a contradiction. And morally deficit.

I believe that applying these theories to this particular issue does present an adequate response. I personally have a lot of very strong feelings about the actions Ryan Walters is taking, and trying

to force on the entire state's children his beliefs. Just yesterday morning he sent an email out with a short video of him praying for Donald Trump, and expected it to be shown to every student. This adds even more complication to the issue as this is now bringing politics into the schools, and completely outside my ethical dilemma outlined here, but goes to show the level of abuse of power that is being attempted. This issue is not being addressed well in real life, some schools are in fact following these edicts, most are not. The Oklahoma supreme court has left it up to individual districts to decide if they will use the Bible as a teaching tool, yet the state superintendent continues to send out these memos to our schools, attempting to bend the laws to suit his religious and political agenda using our children to do so.

Part 7: Conclusion

Is it ethical to teach the Bible in public schools? Simply put, no. The hardships it would bring on everyone who is not of the same mind greatly outweighs those who believe everyone should follow the scripture. The backlash the teachers would have to face outweighs the happiness of those parents who want it taught to their children. When you add in everything else that would bring about unhappiness in our communities with this edict, it is very clear that the moral thing to do is to leave religion out of schools. We have religious private schools for those who want their children to learn the Bible along with their reading and critical thinking, and it should stay that way. Public schools are not the place for religion or politics. Utilitarianism and Deontology both offer clear answers to this question and have a strong argument against teaching religion in schools.

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